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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the nature of educational changes in Australia, places them in a historical perspective, and describes their implications for the teaching profession and education system. Harrison's (1979) model of the school as a socio-technical system is used to explore current changes in the locus on decision making in New South Wales schools. Within this model, a school is comprised of four interacting subsystems--curriculum, structure, resource utilization, and human relationships. Focusing on curriculum and administration over three periods in Australian education (pre-1971; 1971-89; and 1990-present), the paper concludes that there has been a fundamental mismatch between the practice of curriculum decision making and that of administration since the early 1970s. An increase in school-based curriculum development (SBCD) was accompanied by schools' lack of access to and control over the resource utilization and structure subsystems. Despite their lack of power over administrative aspects, however, many teachers and schools successfully implemented SBDC. The future may entail trading the freedom to make curriculum decisions at the school level for a degree of freedom to make resource and structure decisions at the school level. A concern is the possible deskilling of teachers. One figure is included. (LMI)

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# EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN NSW: MISMATCHED FREEDOMS?

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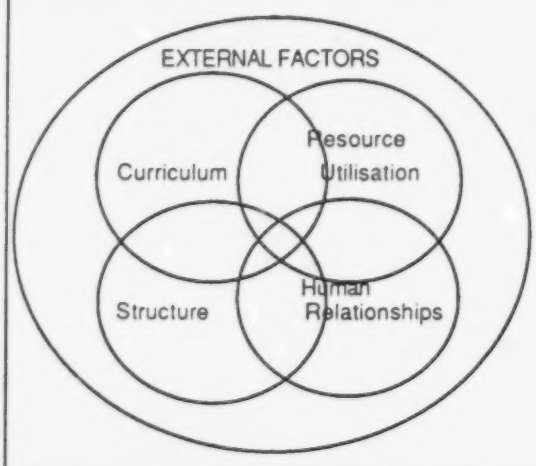
# EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN NSW: MISMATCHED FREEDOMS?

During 1990 and 1991 the Scott Report, the Carrick report, Excellence and Equity and the Education Reform Act have each made significant contributions to a reappraisal of the directions taken by education in N.S.W. The Education Reform Act was the culmination of the process of change which had been charted by the other documents. The Carrick report and Excellence and Equity had made proposals about the structures and content of Education in NSW, while the Scott Report examined the administration of the Department of School Education and of its individual schools. As a totality, these documents represent a thoroughgoing reformation in thinking about the delivery of education in NSW.

The time is ripe for a consideration of the significance of the changes with which we are faced - changes which have impacted on the administration of schools and on their curriculum, and reflect similar trends in other education systems around the world. This paper will examine the nature of these changes, will place them in a historical perspective, and will identify their implications for teachers as a profession and for the education system as a whole.

The nature of the changes taking place can be illuminated by using Harrison's (1979) modification of Owens and Steinhoff's (1976) model of the school as a socio-technical system. This model (Figure 1) suggests that the school is made up of four interacting subsystems: curriculum, structure, resource utilisation and human relationships. The **curriculum** subsystem is dynamic and includes elements such as situation analysis, response to external events, and intended, operational and perceived curriculum. The **structure** subsystem involves staffing allocations, status, authority, role definitions, industrial conditions, regulations and sanctions. The **resource utilisation** subsystem is concerned with the administration of time, money, physical, curriculum and human resources. The **human relationships** subsystem includes such areas as relationships between the various groups and individuals in the school, shared meanings and philosophy, morale, teamwork, and communication patterns in the school. These four interacting subsystems of the school are in turn, impacted upon by factors external to the school, such as system requirements.

FIGURE 1:
HARRISON'S MODEL OF THE SCHOOL AS A SOCIOTECHNICAL SYSTEM




Harrison's contribution goes beyond the reconceptualisation of Owens and Steinhoff's task subsystem as a curriculum subsystem. The revised model recognises and emphasises the fact that the decision-making process is an integral component of all four subsystems, not simply of the structure subsystem. Thus, Harrison's model provides a

model for the systematic exploration of decision making. In this paper the model is used to explore current changes in the locus of decision-making in NSW schools

Prior to 1990, curriculum writers had been able to describe curriculum development in NSW as being at least to some degree, school based (Brady, 1990; Marsh and Stafford, 1989). Excellence and Equity -a veritable "blueprint" for curriculum change in NSW- leaves us in no doubt that the curriculum subsystem is to undergo a significant change:

> As a fundamental point, the Government accepts responsibility for ensuring that all students in our schools have access to a balanced and relevant core curriculum. It rejects the extreme and largely unguided devolution to schools of responsibility for structure, content and coherence of curriculum that has characterised recent educational experimentation in some Australian states.(1989: 13)

While the degree of flexibility available to schools, and the exact nature of the changes to be instituted is not yet totally clear,it is obvious that there will be a shift in the locus of control for curriculum development from the school to the centre. This shift has implications for the **human relationships** subsystem. It is likely to reduce the level of involvement in decision-making at the local level. This reduction may, in turn, impact on communication and, more importantly, on the development of shared meanings within the school..

At the same time as this prospective shift in the locus of curriculum decision making, there have been changes within the **structure** and **resource utilisation** subsystems in NSW Department.of School Education. These changes are evident in the shift in the locus of administrative responsibilities The Scott Report (1989:5), advocates the decentralisation of NSW's very large centralised educational bureaucracy on the basis of the following principles:

> #The school, not the system, is the key organisational element providing teaching and learning;
> #Every school is different and therefore has different needs;
> #The best judge of these needs will usually be the individual school's teachers and its community;
> #Schools will best meet their needs if they are enabled to manage themselves in line with general guidelines;
> #The role of the system, if it is to be effective, must focus on providing support to schools and their leaders.

A conflict exists between these principles and those of Excellence and Equity. In that document, devolution of curriculum development has been described as "extreme", "unguided" and a form of "experimentation". There is also reference to "disturbing deficiencies in the quality, content and development of curriculum" (1989:6). The Carrick Report (1989:15), acknowledged as one of the sources for Excellence and Equity, supports this view when it speaks of the "difficulties widely experienced in school-based curriculum development." This strong and conscious reaction against school-based curriculum development practices is in conflict with the principles of devolution espoused in the administrative area, and is at the root of the mismatch to be examined in the balance of this paper.

The examination focuses on curriculum and administration through three of the subsystems of Harrison's model - namely the resource utilisation and structure subsystems, representing administrative decisions, and the curriculum subsystem. An analysis of the shifts in the locus of decision-making for both administration and curriculum from the 1960s to the present in NSW education provides an appropriate backdrop for the consideration of the current shifts. Three periods are considered. The first period is pre-1971, because it was in 1971 that the rhetoric of SBCD began to appear

in the previously highly prescriptive curriculum documents of NSW (Bezzina, 1983). The second period is from 1971 to 1989, because 1989 was the year of publication of the critical reports. The third period is from 1990 onwards - the period of reform. The trends can be simplified in the table below, using the curriculum and administration categories previously identified :

*TABLE 1: SIMPLIFIED PRESENTATION OF SHIFTS IN THE LOCUS OF ADMINISTRATIVE AND CURRICULUM DECISION-MAKING IN NSW EDUCATION*

| CURRICULUM | ADMINISTRATION |
|---|---|
| **Pre 1971:** Curriculum highly prescriptive with centralised decision-making | Strong centralised bureaucracy |
| **1971-1989** The rise and fall of the school-based curriculum movement, with descriptive documents and a measure of local autonomy | A move towards a three tier system, but with little local control over resources and structure. |
| **1990 -** Return to a more centralised form of curriculum development, with the institution of Key Learning Areas, and allocation of curriculum development responsibilities to a single, central Board of Studies. | Devolution of responsibility for matters such as budgets and staffing to schools and clusters of schools. |

Table 1 clearly illustrates the view that since the early 1970s there has been a fundamental mismatch between the practice (and underlying philosophy) of curriculum decision-making and that of the administration in the NSW public education system. Recent changes, moving the locus of control towards schools for administration, and away from schools for curriculum, simply reverse the previously existing mismatch, thus perpetuating the lack of correspondence between the locus of decision making of these two interdependent areas of education. Both the mismatch itself, and its recent change in direction, have implications for teaching as a profession and the educational system as a whole.

In order to appreciate the impact of the mismatch between the loci of curriculum and administrative decision-making, we return to Harrison's model. In the first phase of mismatch (1971-1989) curriculum decision making was progressively decentralised without a corresponding freeing up of control over resource utilisation and structure. The fact is that curriculum decisions cannot stand apart from decisions about resources or structure. Harrison (1981) argued that for decisions in the curriculum subsystem to take effect, other decisions (which she called *implementating* decisions) had to be made in the other subsystems. Where schools had been given at least notional freedom to make curriculum decisions, they were often impeded by lack of control over the resource utilisation subsystem. It must be noted at this point that the change to school-based curriculum development was itself initiated in a top-down fashion. (Rawlinson and Spring:1981) Thus, schools suddenly found themselves in a position of responsibility for curriculum development with a staff who were often not skilled in the area (Smith, 1978; Nettle, 1981; Leithwood,et al., 1982), with few or no additional resources, and limited flexibility in structure or resource utilisation (Nettle, 1981; Prideaux, 1983; Cohen and Harrison, 1982). The strongest message of the literature related to SBCD has been the barrier posed by lack of time(Cohen and Harrison, 1982; Carbines, 1983; Bezzina, 1988; Bezzina, 1989) This may be viewed as a direct function of the mismatch between access to and control over the resource utilisation and structures subsystems on the one hand,

and the curriculum subsystem on the other, where schools were not free to manage people, resources and structures in such a way as to accommodate readily the new practices required by SBCD.

Despite this lack of power over administrative aspects, schools and teachers **did** implement SBCD with a considerable degree of success in many schools. Lack of time is referred to in Excellence and Equity document, connecting it to perceptions of dissatisfaction with SBCD and describing it as an "unwanted burden" (1989:23). Crump (1990) claims that it is hard to argue with this assertion, yet his own view that the 13,283 secondary Other Approved Studies courses developed by teachers is an underestimation of the extent of SBCD activity in Secondary schools, demonstrates that a considerable number of teachers actively pursued this "burden".

Indeed, a recent study by Bezzina(1989) provides evidence that teachers willingly participate in SBCD. He surveyed of the beliefs and attitudes of 64 primary school teachers about participation in SBCD. While they saw pressure on time as a significant cost of participation, respondents had a positive attitude towards participation; considered that significant others thought they should participate; felt personally that they ought to participate; and considered that they had both the ability and the opportunity to participate in SBCD. These perceptions translated into positive dispositions towards participation, positive intentions about participation, and a moderately high level of actual participation. Perhaps the claim that participation in SBCD is an unwanted burden is only half right. It is certainly a burden, but not always unwanted.

Some of the other costs of participation in curriculum decision-making which may contribute to its burdensome nature, might be attributed to schools either being inadequately resourced, or lacking adequate local control over their resource utilisation and structure subsystems. Some examples of these costs are stress (Pitt and Jennings, 1984), lack of reward (Lortie, 1975) and sacrificing organisational identity (Skilbeck, 1984).

Despite these "burdens", some significant benefits of participation in curriculum decision-making have been identified. These include increased job-satisfaction (Bezzina, 1983), commitment to decisions (Hewitson, 1978), feelings of ownership (Duke, Showers and Imber, 1980), better decisions (Pitt and Jennings, 1984), more effective decisions (Cohen and Harrison, 1982), increased ability to meet the needs of students (Nettle, 1981) and increased commitment from participants (Imber, 1983). These benefits, which may be largely taken away from the curriculum subsystem of schools by recent reforms, are the very advantages which are being sought for the resource utilisation and structure subsystems of the school by the Scott report.

The practice of SBCD over the last twenty years can be characterised as having been hamstrung by the mismatch between the freedom available to make decisions in the curriculum subsystem, and that available in the resource utilisation and structure subsystems. Despite this, considerable benefits can be said to have accrued. What, then ,of the new scenario which is unfolding, where we have proposed changes leading to a new type of mismatch?

The situation which is likely to prevail as the recommendations of the various reports come into force is that schools may have less responsibility for curriculum decisions regarding creation or adaptation, with the emphasis being on implementation of centrally prescribed syllabuses. At the same time, schools will have new responsibilities for the management of their own financial affairs and for the selection and deployment of staff. This will reap the benefits of autonomy at an administrative level, allowing it to be responsive to change and sensitive to local conditions, but will deprive the school of much of its ability to be responsive and sensitive in the curriculum area. (It will be interesting, though, to see whether this particular act of devolution is resourced and supported any more fully than the last).

A frightening aspect of the recent changes is the prospect of the deskilling of teachers. Much of the local autonomy in administrative matters will reside with school executives, in an area where teachers have little desire for increased participation (Bezzina, 1983). Tripp (1989:80) has described what is happening in the process of administrative devolution as a

> reassertion of control over schools through the simple corporate method of devolving the means of production, but controlling the nature and quality of what is produced.

Crump (1990:3) describes the situation regarding the curriculum decision-making responsibilities of teachers clearly and forcefully:

> The government's intention is that the occupational culture of teachers will return to one of being servant to the public in its worst sense, to function like a checkout operator for supermarket style education which shelves "No Name" products according to (highly erratic) market forces.

To take Crump's analogy further, the NSW Education system may be likened (in one possible scenario) to a chain of supermarkets in which the managers are expected to run an efficient business with considerable local autonomy over everything except what they sell. Head office will determine (with limited exceptions) the range of commodities which is suitable for all its stores which will be unable to respond sensitively to differences in consumer demand in different areas, and to the advice of store personnel who really know how to tailor or refine products that are marketable, attractive and of value to their particular customers.

It is useful, in a time of reform, to consider the possibilities which face us. While the scenario adopted in this paper may be considered extreme, it is not outside the bounds of possibility, and certainly reports the directions, if not the outcomes, of educational change in NSW. If we are not careful, we may end up in a situation where we trade a notional freedom to make curriculum decisions at school level, constrained by structures and lack of control over resources, for a degree of freedom to make resource and structure decisions at school level, frustrated by a lack of control over curriculum.

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